California P-16 Council

Subcommittee 2
Report and Recommendations

How can we provide all students the opportunity to master rigorous work- and college-ready curricula?

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March 1, 2006

If current education policies continue unchanged, the California workforce of 2020 is going to be less educated than today's and the state's per-capita income will drop substantially. The transformation will occur as baby boomers, the most highly educated generation in U.S. history, retire. Across the country they will be replaced by a growing population of young workers from the nation's least-educated minority groups. The share of the workforce that is college educated will shrink accordingly, losing the U.S. much of its advantage in the global marketplace.

National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education
November 2005

States must ensure that students arrive in high school ready to perform high school-level work and leave ready for the real demands of college and the workplace. To ensure that all students take the rigorous courses and master content needed to meet real-world demands, all young people should take a rigorous college-prep curriculum with course requirements that include four years of rigorous English and a math curriculum that covers geometry, Algebra II, and data analysis and statistics. Equally important, states should create exams to the level of achievement expected to enter college and work.

National Governors Association, *Action Agenda*
February 2005

How can we provide all students the opportunity to master rigorous work- and college-ready curricula? The nine-person Subcommittee 2 of the Superintendent's P-16 Council convened several meetings for seven months to answer that question.[1] While there was a depth of discussion concerning the state of rigor in education in California and a review of related research, the subcommittee's response is summarized in two major recommendations, which appear later in this section.

Guiding Assumptions

The following are guiding assumptions for the recommendations made by Subcommittee 2:

1. California has multiple indicators of rigor that guide the high school curriculum. Because these different indicators are not well integrated or connected, there is no consistent statewide standard of rigor.

2. In high school, students develop different interests. Therefore, rigor should not be limited to academic classes, but rather should pervade and be evident in all high school courses. The education system should offer many pathways, not different tracks. A career or technical path should not preclude a student from being eligible or prepared for college; nor should a college-preparatory path exclude courses for careers or more applied learning. Each path should be equally challenging to ensure that whether students immediately pursue college or the workforce, all are prepared and have multiple options available.

Recommendations

The recommendations from Subcommittee 2 are discussed next.

Recommendation 1

California must find ways to motivate, engage, and support districts, schools, and teachers to provide challenging courses that prepare all students for higher education and work.

Necessary support might include making materials aligned to the standards available and offering monetary and technical assistance for districts and schools so that students gain greater access to rigorous college- and work-preparatory courses.

Rationale for Recommendation 1

While the standards adopted for California are widely regarded as among the most rigorous in the country, California high schools often do not consistently offer rigorous courses to all students. To deal with this problem, this recommendation calls for the creation of additional incentives to engage and motivate schools and districts toward providing more rigorous pathways that are fully accessible to all students. The fiscal reality facing California's public school districts is such that without additional incentives, there is no possibility that a sustained, coordinated statewide push toward additional

[1] Details on the subcommittee's activities appear in Appendix 1, "Subcommittee Process."

rigor will succeed. These incentives are most needed to support districts and schools in developing additional career-technical pathway programs that also benefit students in postsecondary study at either the college or university level. The goal is to prepare every student to succeed in postsecondary education or the world of work without the need for remediation.

Recommendation 2

California should seek better coordination and connections across the many disparate indicators now in use for representing rigor in high school curricula.

California should conduct a systematic, comparative analysis that looks at the intersections of the state's academic and career-technical standards, the exit exam, and local graduation requirements and course offerings. The goal is to identify a single, consistent standard of rigor across all these components.

The approval process for the "a-g" course requirement should do more to offer clear criteria for the content of courses that would meet those requirements. Clear criteria, or standards, would help high schools develop more courses that are rigorous, enable better alignment between the standards for kindergarten through grade twelve and those for CSU and UC admissions and placement, and ensure that "a-g" designations are more consistently applied.

Rationale for Recommendation 2

The following is a list of the most widely used indicators for rigor in California's high school curricula.

a. California's academic content standards for student learning are widely regarded as among the most rigorous in the country. However, high schools often lack incentives to motivate students to reach these standards.

b. The California Standards Tests set performance levels of advanced, proficient, basic, below basic, and far below basic.

c. The "a-g" course requirements qualify students for entry into the California State University and the University of California systems. The "a-g" course requirements play a strong role in shaping high school curricula.

d. State law in Education Code Section 51220 defines the course completion and graduation requirements.

e. The California High School Exit Exam is a minimal graduation requirement.

f. Newly adopted standards for Career and Technical Education focus on the rigor of vocational programs.

g. The Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) accreditation process is a review in which every comprehensive public and private high school participates.

California's many indicators of rigor often point high schools in radically different directions. Through coordination and connection across all elements of the whole system, it may be possible to achieve coherence and additional opportunities for success for all California students. Periodic review of standards, for continual improvement, will ensure that they reflect a real-world application of knowledge and skills. A system of rigorous, aligned state standards will encourage and enhance high-quality professional development for teachers and school leaders.

Subcommittee Process

- The first meeting of Subcommittee 2 was in Palo Alto during the July 20, 2005, plenary meeting of the Superintendent's P-16 Council. Suzanne Tacheny and Carol Rava Treat were selected as cofacilitators. Richard Alonzo was selected as the alternate facilitator.

  - Work focused on three questions:

    1. What is rigor?
    2. At the classroom level what is needed for high school students to succeed in a rigorous environment?
    3. At the system level what is needed to deliver and support a rigorous environment for all students?

  - Discussion led to the conclusion that rigor needs to encompass more than the "a-g" course requirements used for entry into the University of California and the California State University systems.

  - Consensus was that **academic rigor** and **workforce needs** have to be tightly connected.

  - The subcommittee agreed that California lacks a **common definition of *rigor***. Developing a common, workable definition became the first critical task.

  - The subcommittee reviewed *Closing the Expectations Gap* and the American Diploma Project's *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts*.

- On September 2, 2005, the subcommittee met by means of a conference call during which committee member Stanley Murphy articulated what became an often-repeated mantra for the subcommittee:

  > Each school must be clear and consistent about its expectations for students. Every teacher must be clear about schoolwide expectations for high-quality work. Every student must be expected to perform at the level of the standards. No one can be allowed to perform below standard.

  - During that call, the subcommittee came to a second conclusion that was emphasized often in all subsequent discussions: rigor must be directly relevant to reaching a long-term goal. High school programs need to be focused on helping students to reach their long-term, postsecondary life goals. As Brian McInnis said during the meeting, "Students need to know that what they are doing today is directly related to their long-term, after-school-is-finished goals. Students need to know that each day they are moving toward their goals."

During the conference call, another lingering issue emerged: access to higher education is often determined geographically and economically. Committee member Sherry Lansing was very clear that whatever proposal may emerge, every student should have full access and more-than-ample opportunity.

- The subcommittee came to consensus about another aspect of the problem. While both the UC and the CSU systems require the same courses for admissions (i.e., the "a-g" requirements), in California there is little school-to-school consistency in actual course expectations. What is taught in one high school may be very different from what is taught in another. Just because two high schools call the same course by the same name does not mean that the courses are the same. Expectations may be very different.

- The subcommittee reached a consensus that **expectations need to be consistent across the state**. Every student completing the same course should reach the same standards.

❖ At the Los Angeles meeting, hosted at the Getty Museum, the subcommittee focused its work on three key pieces that are often said to define rigor in high school:

1. The California academic content standards
2. The state laws that define graduation requirements as a required sequence of courses (particularly *Education Code* Section 51220)
3. The "a-g" course requirements for admission to college

- As the subcommittee reviewed these elements, it concluded that there is **no discernable alignment** among them. Each was created for a distinct purpose and bears little relationship to the others.

- Each element sends a different **message** to California's high schools. The lack of alignment in these three crucial indicators causes confusion.

- The subcommittee concluded that California's many indicators of rigor often point high schools in radically different directions. If all elements of the whole system are coordinated and connected, it may be possible to achieve coherence among programs and additional opportunities for success for all California students.

- Deputy Superintendent Sue Stickel asked the subcommittee to review the work of other states to see whether any of them have models that California could emulate.

❖ During the October 28, 2005, conference call, the subcommittee reviewed materials describing Indiana's Core 40 curriculum, Maryland's Core Bridge Goals, and Virginia's high school requirements.

- Karen Shores and John Merris-Coots from the Secondary, Postsecondary, and Adult Leadership Division informed the subcommittee about the newly adopted career technical standards.

- The subcommittee examined the review processes that the Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools (BOARS) Committee uses to determine which courses become eligible for the "a-g" listing.

- The subcommittee was polled on an issue that had been a part of many previous discussions: *Should "a-g" be the default curriculum for all California students?* The subcommittee unanimously agreed to **not** recommend this course of action.

- The subcommittee agreed that whether a student pursues a course of study that leads to immediate employment in a career technical field or that is aimed at university admission; **all** California students should experience courses of a similar level of rigor. No student should be permitted to pursue a weakened course of study simply to get out of high school easily.

- In preparation for the December 9 plenary meeting of the full P-16 Council, Carol Rava Treat and Suzanne Tacheny agreed to create an initial set of draft recommendations whole subcommittee to consider and approve.

❖ On December 9 the initial set of draft recommendations was reviewed by the full subcommittee and approved unanimously.

"A-G" Is Not the Answer to Rigor

For many California high schools, the percentage of students taking and completing "a-g" courses is used as the primary benchmark of **rigor**. Subcommittee 2 carefully reviewed the criteria by which a course is judged as qualified for "a-g" eligibility. The members were dismayed to find that there are no explicit, standards-aligned criteria to guide the process. A course could be eligible for the "a-g" requirement, but the content may not address any of the grade-appropriate California standards.

Nor is the approval process clear and transparent. Instead, it is tortuous and convoluted. There are many informal rules and “tricks” that schools have to understand fully if they wish to have a course listed as eligible. Phrasing is the key for a successful application.

Finally, Subcommittee 2 was concerned to learn that student achievement data are not reviewed to determine whether a particular course is deemed "a-g" eligible. As an indicator for the rigor of a course, the review process of "a-g" courses is wholly inadequate.

WASC Accreditation Is Not Sufficient

The subcommittee also asked whether a school’s WASC accreditation was a sufficient indicator of the rigor of a school’s courses. Unfortunately, the answer was **no**.

WASC accreditation is a review process that requires a school to conduct extensive self-evaluation about its processes for continuing improvement. During the actual visit to the site, the WASC visitation team is charged with determining the accuracy of this self-evaluation. If the self-evaluation was determined to be an honest appraisal of the school’s processes, accreditation is awarded.

The subcommittee noted that there are high schools in Program Improvement status for failing to make adequate yearly progress, and yet those same schools continue to receive accreditation.

Although the California academic content standards are a component of the WASC review, they are not the most essential one. The subcommittee would have more confidence in the WASC review process if ensuring that every student is performing at or near grade-level standard were more central to determining a school's accreditation.

Rigor Must Focus on the Standards

The subcommittee strongly believes that the California academic content standards must be the central consideration in any determination of high school rigor. They define what students must know and be able to do. Every program at every school must ensure that every student reaches the levels of achievement defined by California's standards.

To say that a high school program is **rigorous** without considering whether all students are achieving the standards, the subcommittee feels, is not acceptable. Every discussion of rigor must be fully grounded in the California academic content standards.

The subcommittee is aware that both the quality and the content of instruction can differ widely from school to school and, in some schools, from classroom to classroom. This difference means that neither a potential employer nor a college admissions officer can be assured that every high school graduate has acquired the skills and knowledge specified in the California academic content standards. Some students from some high schools may have the essential skills and knowledge, but there is no assurance that any particular candidate will have them. For that reason requiring the attainment of the standards instead of the completion of courses is a better measure of high school rigor.

California Must Avoid Tracking

The subcommittee strongly believes that every student in every high school should have the same economic and educational opportunities. Adolescents should be fully supported so that they can maximize the opportunities available to them. No student should be shunted to a lower or less rigorous **track**.

Rigor should not be limited to so-called academic classes but rather should pervade the entire high school. Rigor should be evident in every high school course. The graduating high school class of 2005 included 115,680 students who completed the "a-g" courses; this number represents only 33.7 percent of the year's high school graduates. Two of every three high school graduates in 2005 did not complete the courses necessary for admission to UC or CSU.

Every high school must challenge all its students to achieve the highest expectations. Every student should have multiple career and postsecondary educational options available. Whether a student chooses to attend college immediately after high school graduation or to begin a career before going on for further study, a full range of opportunities must be provided. California's educational system needs to ensure equal access to the most rigorous programs for all students.

Even the Best Students Need Remedial Support in College

The subcommittee was concerned that even California's best-achieving students often need remedial support in college. The members noted that evidence proved that over 50 percent of the incoming students in the UC system have to take remediation in either mathematics or writing.

The subcommittee strongly believes that before students enter high school, they should be reading and doing mathematics at or near grade-level expectations. The subcommittee supports providing struggling students with **bridge** opportunities to improve their academic skills.

The subcommittee also believes that each student needs to experience an integrated, coordinated curriculum, using high-quality instructional materials that support the frameworks adopted by the California State Board of Education (SBE). Every student also needs great teachers to teach this integrated and coordinated curriculum.

Messages Differ Because California Lacks Alignment

The subcommittee reviewed seven different indicators that California uses to determine rigor:

1. The California academic content standards
2. The California Standards Tests
3. The "a-g" course requirements
4. Course completion and graduation requirements (as defined by state law in *Education Code* Section 51220)
5. The California High School Exit Exam
6. Newly adopted standards for career and technical education
7. The WASC accreditation process

The subcommittee found that these indicators were not well integrated or connected. Each gives schools a different message about what may be **rigorous**.

The subcommittee believes that California would benefit from a deep analysis of where these different indicators coincide or diverge. The goal is for all the indicators to point California high schools in the same direction and toward the same ends.

Rigor Is Defined

A major accomplishment of the subcommittee was its progress in defining *rigor*. Its working definition applies not only to the present discussion but also to all of California's conversations about improving instructional quality:

Rigor presupposes clearly defined expectations that are visible, broadly understood, and consistently applied. *Rigor* also requires compelling motivation for rising to those expectations.

California's Going to Get a Shocking Education

IF THERE'S STILL anyone who thinks that education levels and income in California will continue their steady rise, they may be in for a shock. If current education policies continue unchanged, the California workforce of 2020 is going to be less educated than today's, according to a recent report released by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, and the state's per-capita income will drop more substantially than elsewhere in the country.

The transformation will occur as baby boomers, the most highly educated generation in U.S. history, retire. Across the country they will be replaced by a growing population of young workers from the nation's least-educated minority groups. The share of the workforce that is college educated will shrink accordingly, losing the U.S. much of its advantage in the global marketplace. The problem is national, but in California it will be particularly severe. Consider some of our report's findings: The Latino population, by far the least educated of any of the state's large minority groups, is expanding dramatically. By 2020, Latinos will make up as large a share of the state's working-age population (people 25 to 64 years old) as whites — about 38% Latino and 39% white. This is a seismic shift; in 1990, only 22% of working-age adults were Latino and 61% were white. And the gap in education between Latinos and whites in California will turn the demographic shift into a statewide economic decline.

Just look at the numbers. Among California's current working-age population, 46% of whites have a college degree, while 12% of Latinos do, according to census data. At the other end of the education spectrum, more than half of working-age Latinos do not have even a high school diploma, compared to 8% of whites.

Yet the state is making only limited progress with its current students. Over the last decade, California has managed to raise the percentages of 18- to 24-year-olds that have high school diplomas, and the percentage of those enrolled in college. But of those who do enroll in college or post-high school certificate programs, the percentage of those actually completing the programs is very low compared to other states. And on every one of these measures, the gaps between young Latinos, on the one hand, and young whites, blacks and Asian Americans remain large.

To some extent, the problem may be one of inadequate preparation in California's schools. Among the measures we follow at the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, one is particularly telling. We track the percentage of low-income eighth-graders in each state who score at or above "proficient" on the national assessment exam in math. Among the top states, an average 23% of low-income students are this well prepared for higher education. California is only at 9%.

But preparation is not the whole story. The expense of higher education can also be prohibitive. California provides more low-cost college options than most states and has recently increased its investment in need-based financial aid. But for the poorest 40% of California families, the cost each year of sending a child to community college still amounts to more than a third of the average family income. The cost of sending a child to a public four-year college, even after figuring in financial aid, amounts to nearly half of such a family's income.

If California does nothing more to raise the education level of its residents, and particularly of its largest, fastest-growing and least-educated minority group, it can expect to lose economic ground against the world and other states. For the sake of all, California's continuing educational disparities must be confronted and removed.

Reprinted with permission from Patrick M. Callan, “California’s Going to Get a Shocking Education, “*Los Angeles Times*, November 26, 2005, B.19.

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Action Agenda for Improving America's High Schools

This 2005 Education Summit Action Agenda identifies steps states can follow to raise graduation rates and close preparation gaps.

Developed in consultation with state leaders and national K-12 and higher education organizations, the *Action Agenda for Improving America's High Schools* calls on state leaders to:

- ***Make All Students Proficient & Prepared.*** States must ensure that students arrive in high school ready to perform high school-level work and leave ready for the real demands of college and the workplace. To ensure that all students take the rigorous courses and master content needed to meet real-world demands, all young people should take a rigorous college-prep curriculum with course requirements that include four years of rigorous English and a math curriculum that covers Geometry, Algebra II, and data analysis and statistics. Equally important, states should create college- and work-ready assessments and raise the bar for end-of-course exams to the level of achievement expected to enter college and work.

- ***Redesign the American High School.*** It is not enough to raise requirements. The average high school must be made more flexible, supportive, and effective in helping low-performing students catch up with their peers. As part of this effort, states must provide additional academic supports for low-performing students and expand the range of high quality high school options for students by financing new types of high schools and providing opportunities for students to take college-level classes and earn credit while attending high school.

- ***Give High Schools the Excellent Teachers and Principals They Need.*** Strong teachers and principals are crucial for helping all students meet higher standards and leave high school ready for college and work. States must continue to raise the standards for licensure and redesign preparation and professional development to have greater flexibility and accountability in achieving higher standards. They also must continually expand new incentives for teachers to work in the neediest schools and to improve principal leadership.

- ***Hold High Schools and Colleges Accountable for Student Success***. High schools should be held accountable for improving college and work readiness rates across all student subgroups and that data on high school performance are publicly accessible and user-friendly. Two- and four-year colleges should be held accountable for improving retention and graduation rates. The document calls on states to set five- and ten-year statewide goals and track progress in increasing high school graduation rates, percentages of students who are prepared for college and work, and postsecondary enrollment and completion rates.

- ***Streamline and Improve Education Governance.*** Because almost every state operates K-12 and postsecondary education as separate systems, the report calls on states to move toward a more unified and seamless governance systems with a single board that has authority over early childhood, elementary, secondary and higher education.

High Schools

Overview

America's high school are failing to prepare too many of our students for their futures. Nationwide only 71 percent of students graduate from high school, and worse, only about half of black and Latino students graduate. Nearly a third of high school graduates who goes on to college require immediate placement in remedial education courses.

Our high school students' lack of preparedness has serious implications for our economy and prosperity. For most of the nation's history, manufacturing workers with modest formal education could earn decent wages. For roughly 60 percent of the jobs in today's labor market, at least some postsecondary education is needed, and that percentage is expected to increase in the years ahead.

The NGA Center for Best Practices' Action Agenda for Improving America's High Schools can ensure the readiness of the nation's high school students for college, work, and citizenship. Its five major recommendations were the basis of the 2005 National Education Summit on High School in February 2005:

- Restore value to the high school diploma;
- Redesign high schools;
- Give high school students the excellent teachers and principals they need;
- Set goals, measure progress, and hold high schools and college accountable; and
- Streamline and improve education governance.

These recommendations guide the major efforts underway in states now, and supported through the NGA Center's Honor States Grant Program. This $42 million initiative is supported by a national coalition of foundations, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, the Kauffman Foundation, the Prudential Foundation, and the State Farm Foundation.
Since the release of the *Action Agenda for Improving America's High Schools*, the NGA Center has continued to release information to inform and guide states on statewide reform efforts to improve America's high schools. The main recommendation of the report, *Graduation Counts: A Report of the NGA Task Force on State High School Graduation Data*, and agreement made in the compact signed by more than 40 governors is for states to move toward using a standard calculation for a high school graduation rate. *Findings from Rate Your Future*, a survey conducted among more than 10,000 teens ages 16-18, offers a new perspective on what change is needed to prepare students for college and work.

California: Number of Courses Required for High School Graduation vs. College Admissions

Content Areas	**High School Graduation**	**UC/CSU Admissions** (a-to-g)
English	3.0	4.0
Mathematics	2.0 (inc. Algebra I)	3.0 (thru Algebra II)
Science	2.0	2.0 (one must include lab)
History/Social Science	3.0	2.0
Foreign Language	1.0	2.0
Art	1.0	1.0
Physical Education	1.0	--
Elective	0.5	1.0
Totals	**13.5**	**15.0**

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